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THE FAITH OF THE ENGLISH

Integrating Christ and culture

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SPCK

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I would like to dedicate this book in memory of my grandparents, Nora and Reg Soar, who unwittingly and in very different ways rooted me in home and place

‘The Word became flesh; he made his home among us,
and we saw his glory . . . full of grace and truth’
The Gospel of John (REB)

‘And did those feet in ancient time
walk upon England’s mountains green?’
William Blake

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Introduction

A story is told of the days of apartheid in South Africa when the white English Fathers of the Community of the Resurrection worked in a black township outside Johannesburg. No one is quite sure whether it concerns the more famous Trevor Huddleston or one of his contemporaries, but for our purposes it doesn't really matter – the story is about a white English priest (Allen, 2006, p. 26). Every day the priest had to walk from home to the church to say Mass and every day he passed the house of a woman who took in washing to make her meagre living. Most days she would be pegging out clothes on the line in the African sun as the priest made his way along the road by her house. It being Africa and the priest being white, he naturally had a big black hat and a flowing white cassock to protect him from that sun. And every time he passed the woman at her work with the washing he would doff his hat to her. A normal and everyday sign of respect and even reverence in English culture, a thing he probably didn't even notice he was doing. One day the woman's teenage son was present and noticed this event, and was shocked to his core that a white man would show respect to a poor black woman in the days of apartheid. It moved him and he never forgot it – especially since he too, in time, joined the ranks of the Community of the Resurrection as a priest. His name was and still is Desmond.

This is a story of ordinary English courtesy and politeness in the service of the gospel. The gospel that proclaims the good news to everyone regardless of their colour. It is a story I wanted to begin this book with because it signposts what we shall be exploring throughout the forthcoming chapters.

The story illustrates the 'hiddenness' of culture to those within it. We do not notice our own culture because we are brought up simply to assume it – it slips under the surface of our lives

in our early years to do its hidden work. So, in order to see what drives us, we shall want to find ways of digging down into behaviour like the doffing of a hat. The story shows us that our culture only really becomes visible when placed alongside another culture, and the question that raises, for those of us who do not live and work outside England, is: how can we become more aware of our own culture if it is so hidden down below? We cannot start any kind of integration with our faith if we don't recognize our culture when it manifests itself.

The question of faith is therefore raised – it mattered in the story that the priest was a man of faith on his way to his daily devotion. There seems to be a natural, self-deprecating, unhurried beauty about his behaviour that might only come from a Christian Englishman. As the title of this book suggests, therefore, there could be a real and deep connection between the kind of hidden English culture that we naturally and unconsciously display and the Christian faith which has been part of our national life for over 1,500 years. But is this right? We know that not all the things that white English missionaries did in their work in the 'colonies' served the gospel in quite the same way as the priest in our story. Indeed, getting excited about being English has been more associated with right-wing racist groups in recent years. So we are going to put English culture and the Christian faith into dialogue such that we hope both might emerge transformed. Our aim will be to see if there is a proper, good and true integration of English culture and the Christian faith to be found, and if so, what it might look like.

Finally, our priest was on a journey in mission each day from home to church. Yet today you are unlikely to notice the doffing of a hat as a sign of politeness. So, on the journey that we'll be sharing together, I hope you'll find yourself asking questions about mission in contemporary England beyond the days when Christendom could be assumed and God might be thought of as an Englishman (see Moreton, 2010).

At this point it is worth outlining the shape of the book, the journey that we are going to make and some of the things we might need to be aware of on the way.

This book is presented first and foremost as a work of theology, but as the reader will find out, the emphasis is on what is known these days as practical theology and in some ways could be also termed missiology – theological reflection on the missionary task of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. As is necessary in practical theology, we'll be dipping into other disciplines on the journey – most notably social anthropology and theories of learning and adult theological education.

Perhaps here we need a kind of health warning, as I hope the previous paragraph doesn't put you off. For some people might get as far as the word theology and think this book is not for them. What I want to say here is that I have written the book for those readers who are often described as 'thinking Christians', a term that is quite inadequate because much of the book could just as easily be read by people who don't consider themselves Christians – and really, are there such people as 'unthinking Christians'? The book does therefore require some level of engagement with theological ideas, but I have tried wherever concepts need to be introduced to explain them fully and give examples. Overall I have written the book holding especially in mind all those who would count England as home, but who are also restless about what is beyond its horizon.

While the book stands alone as a work of practical theology, I am also offering with it a short theological adult learning course which I hope will fulfil the aim, expressed in the book as a whole, of integrating Christian faith and English culture. The course is designed for anyone (although those wanting to facilitate it would benefit from some level of adult education skills) who would like to think about the relationship between Englishness and the Christian faith in a small group learning environment. Thus part of the journey in the book is explaining how this course came to be created, what the thinking behind it is and what results have been discovered so far when running it.

I begin in Chapter 1 by introducing our first concept – that of inculturation. Here we are firmly in the field of missiology and its reflection during the past 40 or so years on the relationship between faith and culture around the world – the very stuff we

want to explore. We'll also begin to understand at the end of that chapter the relationship between missiology, practical theology and adult theological learning.

Chapter 2 attempts to describe Englishness and looks at the burgeoning literature on the subject over the past few years. Several approaches to understanding Englishness are explored, including that of investigating our historical and sometimes mythical origins. We conclude the chapter with a comprehensive description of the 'cultural heart' of the English from the social anthropologist Kate Fox (2004).

We pick up the theme of learning most fully in Chapter 3, where the theory and method behind the course that goes along with the book is fully explained. It is perhaps the most complex of all the chapters as it requires a discussion of hermeneutics – the theory and practice of interpreting texts or finding meaning in them. While it isn't absolutely necessary for the argument of the whole book, I hope most readers will stay with it – not least because I argue for the importance of using the imagination in our theology and mission today, a much neglected area.

In Chapter 4, we take a side road into the greenwood! This chapter, focusing as it does on the Robin Hood legends, stands alone as a theological reflection in its own right. It is important in the book, though, as it provides an example of the kind of work that needs to be done if there is to be such a thing as an emergent English contextual theology. It is a contribution to the *deep listening* to our culture that I believe is necessary.

I am not the only writer of this book. Chapter 5 distils the work of several small groups of willing participants (to whom I am very grateful) who piloted the Englishness course for me. This is where we begin that integration, conversation and dialogue between the description of Englishness we discovered in Chapter 2 and the gospel as we have received it. I present the initial findings there, but they are only initial because, I hope, as the course is run again and again new insights should continue to emerge.

The book concludes with a slightly more speculative chapter wondering about the implications of English inculturation for

mission today in our land. In these last two chapters I hope to pose more questions than answers to the reader, not least because that is the kind of time we are in. My desire is that as you interact with the questions you might be stimulated to go on thinking and working with the issues raised.

Before we finally get going I would like to say thanks for reading the book. If you have any questions, or you would like some advice on running your own version of the Englishness course, do not hesitate to get in touch with me. I always respond to emails sent to <nigel.rooms@southwell.anglican.org>.

1

Inculturation – or integrating faith and culture

I have only once, in 40 or so years as a Christian, been led in worship in my own 'vernacular'. My first language is English, but there are a huge variety of local variations of it, as we all know, and I grew up speaking one of them – my 'vernacular'.

It happened a few years ago. I was attending a service at a local theological college, at which the ministers leading the worship were a couple in training from my home town of Hull. The English accent native to the East Riding of Yorkshire is a particular and peculiar one and I grew up with it for the first 18 years of my life. I have not lived there permanently since, but the experience of being transported there via the familiar words of the liturgy was extraordinary. Somehow heaven and earth (or rather 'airth', to use my vernacular!) were connected now in a new and exciting way.

I finally had a personal experience of what I had observed among the Tanzanian Christians alongside whom I worked for seven years in the 1990s. Although our Anglican worship was conducted in the Tanzanian national language, Kiswahili, the words of the liturgy and the hymns were normally translated from English equivalents. Use of Kiswahili in worship was right and good, since it has united over 120 tribes with different languages into a Tanzanian nation with a distinct identity – but it still meant that many people were worshipping God in their second, not their first language. Kiswahili often wasn't their true 'vernacular'. But just occasionally a hymn or chorus would be sung to the local musical idiom of a particular tribe or even

in a vernacular language itself. The joy and vibrancy and the holistic sense of the singers' involvement in the event was in stark contrast to how hymns were normally sung, stiffly and with some distance. Underneath the joy was also a longing, a questioning, even a resistance, giving silent voice to the problem of why this didn't happen more often. 'Why can't my faith and my culture be more integrated?' was the unspoken question that seemed to lie just under the surface.

I was in Tanzania at the invitation of the Anglican Church to develop a 'Theological Education by Extension' (TEE) programme. TEE is like open learning in the UK, in that studies take place part-time at home with written materials as the 'teacher' rather than in an expensive residential college. Asked to write a short course of studies in Kiswahili for lay Christians at the 'grass roots' on, literally, the 'spiritual life', I could not avoid the issue I have just explained. To put it somewhat crudely, how can individuals and the community be both authentically African and authentically Christian? The question is made sharper because the Christianity Africans have inherited is not African in origin but European. After several generations some African culture may already have been lost because of European Christianity's influence. African Christians end up then in the difficult position of having one foot in their (somewhat neutered) African culture and one foot in European Christianity (which doesn't sit happily with them). To put the question another way: is there a more solid foundation on which they can stand in an authentic *African Christianity* that takes both their indigenous culture and the new-found faith seriously?

The question I was addressing is that of 'inculturation', a term theologians and missiologists have coined in the past few decades; simply put, it considers *the proper relationship between faith and culture*.

I returned to work in England early in the twenty-first century, continuing in adult theological education and training in the Anglican Church. The questions my African experience had raised stayed with me and I decided to look into them in more depth.

I soon discovered, though, that the situation as regards questions of faith and culture in the 'post-modern' West, and particularly in England, is not entirely unrelated to the African one. As many people have pointed out in the last decade or so, the Church here as an institution often looks back to a time when it was much more 'of' the culture, to borrow a phrase from Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951). This is the 'Christendom' mode of church, where assumptions about the proximity and overlap of church and state, culture and faith could be made.

So English Christians, it seems, inherit an assumption that was much more prevalent in previous generations, but nevertheless still lingers on – that to be English is somehow synonymous with being Christian. At the 2001 census, and depending somewhat on the region of the country, around 70 per cent of people still claimed to be adherents of the Christian faith. Opinion differs widely among both Christian commentators and secular sociologists of religion as to what most of them meant by this or what the implications of the claim might be for the Church and its mission, yet clearly we are still able to some extent to call ourselves a 'Christian' country.

England has been some kind of a Christian country for more than one thousand years, so we might expect many aspects of our culture to have been influenced by the majority faith (Spencer, 2010). What I am interested in exploring in this book is the relationship between inherited English culture and Christian faith (we shall return to the question of the decline of Christendom and its implications for mission in the final chapter). Foundational to the work of the book, therefore, is a proper understanding of the idea of inculturation, and it is to that task that I now turn.[1]

In examining the term 'inculturation', we will review what has been written on the subject, look at the derivation of the word itself and scrutinize the concept theologically. We will attempt a particular definition, distilled from this work, that will

[1] This chapter is based on, but also much modified and developed from, a journal article I wrote some years ago (Rooms, 2005).

be useful for us. Such a definition will require further examination and clarification of the meaning of the 'Christian faith' or 'gospel' as well as culture itself. The question of 'why' inculturation is so important will be explored alongside examining approaches to its process, the 'how', and its content, the 'what'. The limits of inculturation and a critique of it will be generated alongside a discussion of its usefulness for theology, education and learning in the Church.

What is inculturation? – a definition

A good starting point for thinking about inculturation is to ask a basic question, such as: how has Christianity expanded throughout the centuries? The missiologist Andrew Walls (1999) suggests imagining how an interplanetary scholar of religion with a long life and a periodic research grant might address the vastly different forms of Christianity she (or it?) finds when a field study is made every few centuries. What would the connection be between a small Jewish sect following the teachings of Jesus in the first century and Irish monks doing penance by saying prayers while standing up to their waists in the freezing sea? What do the arguments around the Greek word *homoousios* at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century have to do with sending missionaries to Africa in the nineteenth? Can we discern any continuity between these versions of Christianity? Walls thinks we can, and more of that later.

In a further work Walls compares the expansion of Christianity and Islam. He claims that Christianity's story is one of advance and regression in comparison with the steady geographical progression of Islam (2002, p. 13):

> When it comes to sustaining congregations of the faithful, Christianity does not appear to possess the same resilience as Islam. It decays and withers in its very heartlands, in the areas where it appears to have had the profoundest cultural effects. Crossing cultural boundaries, it then takes root anew on the margins of those areas, and beyond. Islamic expansion is progressive; Christian expansion is serial.

Walls claims this is because Christianity has no culturally fixed element, like the Qur'an, being based as it is on the *person* of Jesus Christ. The unchangeable, even untranslatable Word of the Qur'an and Islam is starkly contrasted with the eternal, pre-existing, personal Word of John's Gospel (John 1.1). So, using the theological idea of incarnation (which we will see is key to understanding inculturation), where the 'Word' ceases to be made flesh (John 1.14) within a community, then 'that community is likely to lose not just its effectiveness, but its powers of resistance'. It is the 'sustained, unceasing penetration of the host culture' (2002, p. 13) that maintains the faith within that culture.

So we know that the thriving Christian communities that once existed throughout the Roman period in what is today Turkey and North Africa no longer survive. Walls claims one very important reason for this was that they ceased to relate the Christian faith to the culture around them by incarnating Christ to others – and it followed that the Church essentially 'died' in these areas. The interaction of Christian faith and culture is then literally a 'matter of life and death' and is the raw material for the study of inculturation.

Inculturation is a 'neologism', that is, a word never in use before which has been 'invented' by Christian theologians working in the field of faith and culture in the last 40 or so years. Some authors think that the word was developed to bring together the sociological term a*culturation* (see further below) and the theological term *in*carnation. As we shall see, it is important not to mix up the word with another sociological term, *enculturation* – this is something subtly different.

The metaphor of a battery may help us here. Inculturation happens in the interaction between the two 'poles' of faith and culture – like the positive and negative terminals of a battery. What can look like very different entities (and which are often kept apart theologically by many in our churches) come together to produce energy, creativity and newness – and even a few sparks from time to time!

Roman Catholic theologians have generally used the term inculturation since just before, and then during and after the

in our early years to do its hidden work. So, in order to see what drives us, we shall want to find ways of digging down into behaviour like the doffing of a hat. The story shows us that our culture only really becomes visible when placed alongside another culture, and the question that raises, for those of us who do not live and work outside England, is: how can we become more aware of our own culture if it is so hidden down below? We cannot start any kind of integration with our faith if we don't recognize our culture when it manifests itself.

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